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## FACILITATING LANGUAGE TESTS DELIVERY THROUGH TABLET PC'S

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### Abstract

Modern trends in educational technology have evidenced the increasing importance of mobile devices in language learning. The need of sophisticated devices that can facilitate lifelong learning wherever the students might be. Facilitating learning, however, implies that students have to be assessed through the same delivery models that are used in their learning mode. Mobile devices are commonly used to learn languages through mobile phones, iPads and Tablet PC's. However, testing methods remain the same as in the last 40 years. In most cases, computer based test tasks resemble too much to those used in pen and paper. This paper shows a pilot study done at the Universidad de Alcala (Madrid-Spain) with tablet PC's indicating its strong aspects as well as its weaknesses. The study concludes that more research is necessary to implement such convenient method of test delivery.

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### 1. Introduction

Testing technology seems to progress along with other learning technologies. However, this progress appears to have become to a halt in the last five years. While mobile devices, have increasingly become prevalent in language education especially in reading and listening, writing still is to be explored and speaking applications are so limited that new forms of student training need to be developed. Likewise, computer based applications for language testing

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have also evidenced little changes over time. It is true that the way in which computers deliver tasks in adaptive tests has evolved considerably but this applies mostly to multiple choice tasks. These tasks do rarely match with real life situations that indicate the student's capacity to communicate. There is a need of sophisticated devices that can facilitate lifelong learning wherever the students might be. Facilitating learning, however, implies that students have to be assessed through the same delivery models that are used in their learning mode.

Mobile devices are commonly used to learn languages through mobile phones, iPads and Tablet PC's. However, testing methods remain the same as in the last 40 years. In most cases, computer based test tasks resemble too much to those used in pen and paper (Broadfoot, Oldfield, Sutherland & Timmis, 2014). Whether issues of general testing, especially after Weir's theoretical framework (2005) have been conveniently developed, further developments are related to new ways of delivery. If mobile devices are commonly used to learn languages through mobile phones, iPads and Tablet PC's, why are they not reflected in language assessment. Technology has been conveniently utilized in informal assessment but summative high-stakes language testing has not used them similarly. While the introduction of the iBTTOEFL (Chapelle, Enright & Jamieson, 2008) seemed a promising approach to new developments of language testing, current trends in education claim new approaches in technology. This paper will present briefly one of these new approaches. The use of tablet PC's.

## 2. From paper to tablet PC's

The use of tablet PC's has only been mentioned by Garcia Laborda, Magal Royo, Litzler & Gimenez Lopez (2014) who observed the students' reactions to the use of cell phones but advised the ample limitations of such devices but suggested that some of the overcomes especially in reading and writing could be conveniently overcome by the use of tablet PC's. In order to test such theory in 2011, the consortium between 9 Spanish universities started to work on the design and implementation of a tablet based language test. In November 2013, a first set of trials were done but it was not until December 2014 when the real application was fully implemented (Figure 1).

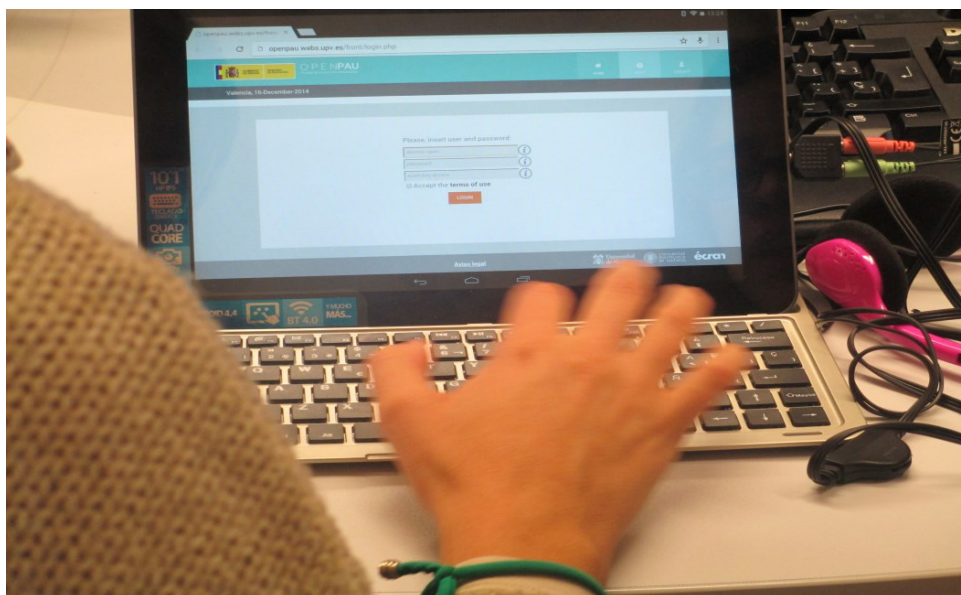


Figure 1. Interface of the OPENPAU University Entrance Examination foreign language section.

### 2.1. Overcoming past problems

While the tests run between 2012-2013 used tablet PC's without keyboard, in 2014 it was decided that students would feel more comfortable if they could work with keyboard. Another aspect that was addressed was that the use of Windows 8 for tablets was replaced by the Android environment. The research team proceeded to acquire 15 Wolder miTab EVOLUTION W2(16 GB 10.1" with a Bluetooth connected keyboard and Android 4.4 Kit Kat) to experiment with a totally new tablet PC. In fact, at the time of the research, the equipment had just been released to the market. A set of minor changes were necessary given the changes. The team also tested the application on desktops and a mobile phones (Figure 2).

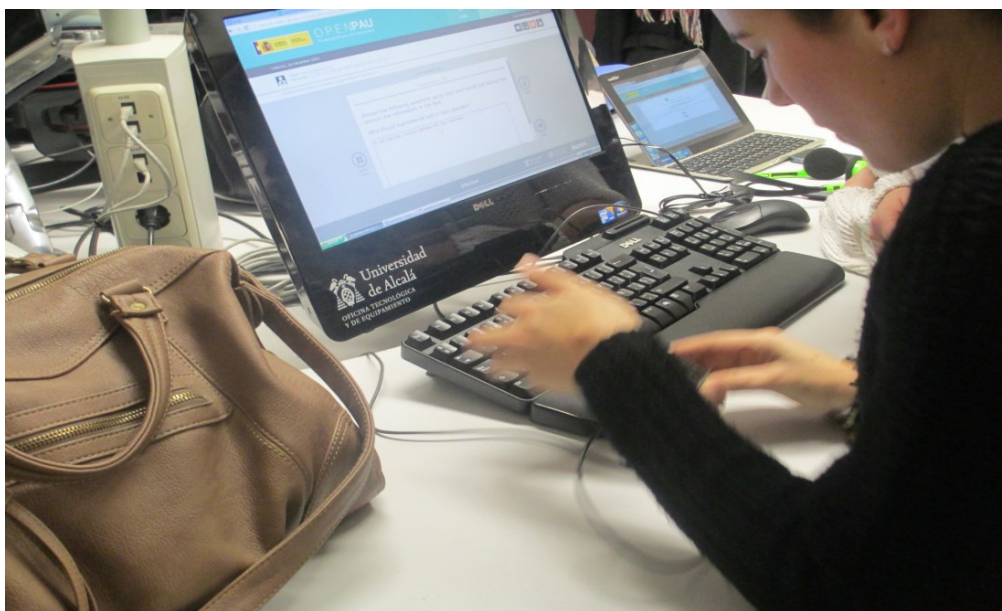


Figure 2. Experimenting and comparing the delivery of the OPENPAU test on a desktop and a tablet PC.

### 2.2. Usability tests

34 students from the Teachers college at Universidad de Alcalá (Spain) were asked to do a mock test and provide feedback on their impressions about their experience. Students were asked to consider the application from three different perspectives: test usability, application usability and applicability to their prospective kids.

*Test usability:* This aspect measured that acceptance of the language test per se. That is whether the test was adequate to measure their language competence. In relation to this aspect students felt that the test was adequate. They felt that the test items matched to what they were used to do in other exams (face validity and probably reliability although this aspect was not measured). However, they felt that the test construct did not actually measure their language knowledge as a whole. Although the test included speaking tasks, not all the students felt that delivering questions was an adequate way to measure their speaking competence. They were happier with the reading and the writing questions and considered that using multiple choice for the listening questions was acceptable but still insufficient. All in all, the students believed that the test construct and rubrics were clear and, above all, an acceptable way to measure their competence.

*Application usability:* This aspect was somehow hard to measure. On one hand, the platform still presents some minor errors so the students associated this issue to usability which, on the other hand, intends to measure visual and

use ergonomics, navigability and use easiness including intuitive interface design and implementation (Figure 3). Students, however, believed that overall the platform was intuitive and the linear design facilitated the chain of tasks. They also valued the possibility to address the different skills in the order they wanted. Their performance was not constrained by the design either.

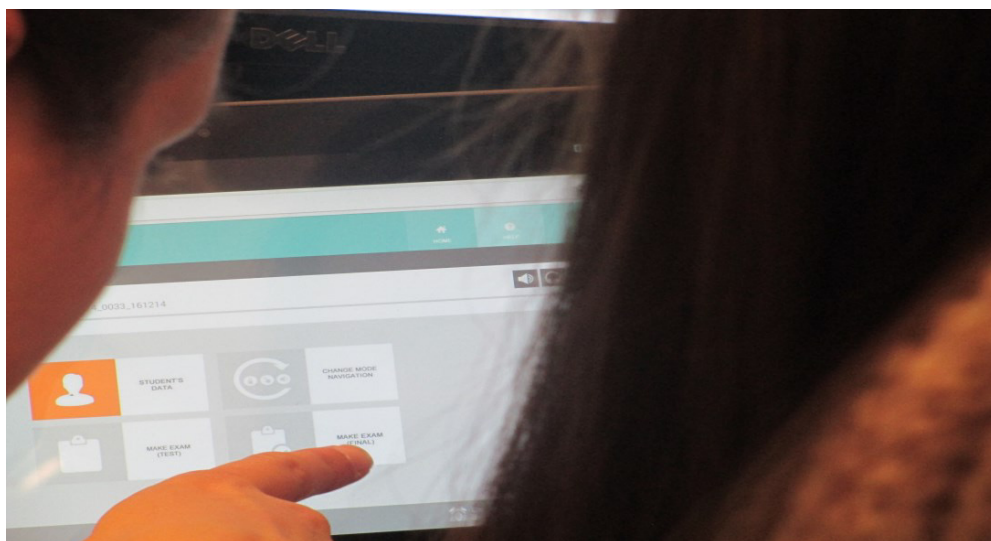


Figure 3. Interface use in real test situation.

*Applicability to their prospective kids:* To us, this was one of the most important aspects to consider. Student teachers believed that the format would be easily accepted by kids after 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This was especially important because there is a clear idea to implement a similar test in the Spanish educational system as soon as in 2016. They believed, nevertheless, that minor changes in format of prompt presentation (such as videos, pictures, etc.) and controls should be revised and made clear to the students. Nonetheless, according to the testees, good training would be enough to cope with possible initial problems.

### 3. Conclusions

The test evidenced the students' great interest in the use of tablet PC's in language testing. Their versatility and ubiquitous capacity also makes them an attractive tool for students, teachers and administrators alike. While computer labs are obviously limited in space the use of tablets permits their use in a broader range of places and situations. It is usually true that desktops are more powerful but streaming and connectivity problems can be solved by choosing the right place of delivery and limiting the use of the tablet to just the use for which the tablets are intended, that is for testing languages. Another important aspect is that since they are mobile devices, they can be used in different schools and classes by so facilitating their specific use. Besides, their price has progressively been reduced to the point to make them competitive against their fixed counterparts. It is also expected that tablets will be increasingly important in education. To happen so, it is necessary that either new interfaces will be developed in the future or an extensive use of keyboards or even speech recognition becomes prevalent.

In conclusion, the tool seems robust enough for its purpose and young students may be open to its use. Although some limitations have been found so far, they may not be serious obstacles to the test implementation. Looking

forward, the researchers believe that the use of tablet PC's can prove more useful than the use of regular desktop computers making this type very accessible and adequate to most schools.

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